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U.S. Envoy Pressed Costa Rica

Effort to Aid Contras Indicates Scope of Administration Role

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The U.S. ambassador to Costa Rica asked the government there at least twice since June to allow a secret air operation to use a remote airstrip in northern Costa Rica for ferrying arms to rebels in Nicaragua, a top Costa Rican official said yesterday.

Ambassador Lewis Tambs' efforts on behalf of the rebel resupply missions, the source said, came while the administration was barred by Congress from assisting rebel military actions. Coupled with the disclosure that the senior U.S. military adviser in El Salvador closely monitored the air resupply network, Tambs' involvement indicates a significantly greater role by

U.S. officials than has been acknowledged.

Tambs contacted Costa Rican officials to "press" them to permit aircraft from the clandestine operation to land at the 1.2-mile dirt strip, the senior Costa Rican official said. The strip, by far the largest private airfield in Costa Rica, was refurbished early this year under the supervision of two Americans working with the clandestine operation, according to crew members.

Tambs, who is in Washington on a visit, could not be reached for comment yesterday, but an administration official said that the ambassador could have been requesting use of the airstrip as a staging area for drops of nonlethal aid to contras inside nearby Nicaragua.

In his comments yesterday, the official said the State Department had paid for a private air cargo company to drop the nonlethal aid into Nicaraguan war zones—the first time the administration has acknowledged such deliveries.

"We were not prohibited from dropping humanitarian aid into Nicaragua," the official said. He declined to name the firm contracted for those flights. Two months ago, Congress renewed military aid for the contras as part of a \$100 million aid package.

The air network supplying weapons to the contras during the con-

gressional ban came to light after the Oct. 5 downing of a C123K cargo plane carrying arms to the contras in southern Nicaragua. One American survivor of that flight, Eugene Hasenfus, was sentenced to 30 years in jail in Nicaragua for his role.

Records from the operation obtained by The Washington Post and crew members identify a Cuban exile who often coordinated the flights from Costa Rica as a former Central Intelligence Agency sabotage operative named Rafael Quintero, whose code name was "Ralph."

In the mid-1970s, Quintero was part of a small circle of associates of now-imprisoned former CIA employee Edwin P. Wilson. Another Wilson associate was retired Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord, who was also a key figure in the contra supply operation, according to participants.

Secord also has been linked to the Iran arms deal.

Attorney General Edwin Meese III said last week that \$10 million to \$30 million from the sales of weapons to Iran were channeled to the contras.

Congressional investigators are looking into whether some of that money was used to finance the clandestine arms drops.

The Costa Rican official said yesterday that the long dirt airstrip, in mountains 13 miles south of the Nicaraguan border near the village of Murcielago, first came to the attention of the government there in June.

In conversations with Tambs soon after that discovery, the ambassador asked Costa Rica for permission to use the strip, said the official, who asked not to be identified. In a subsequent request, Tambs said the secret resupply operation wanted to use the strip only one time, the official said. He quoted Tambs as saying that the operation was planning a series of supply drops to rebels fighting in southern Nicaragua, who badly needed weapons and other munitions.

Through the U.S. Embassy, Costa Rica denied permission three times. On Sept. 3, Costa Rican civil guards cordoned off the airstrip and littered barrels across it to prevent further use.

"That airstrip will not be used with my knowledge, approval or compliance," said Costa Rican President Oscar Arias yesterday, during a visit to Washington. Costa Rica maintains a position of neutrality in the Nicaraguan conflict. Since Arias took office May 8 he has moved to restrict contra activities in his nation.

Members of the arms supply team said the airstrip was planned for launching, refueling and maintaining radio communications with flights into southern Nicaragua. A crew member said that two Americans known as Randy and Bobby, who said they were former U.S. Army Green Beret engineers, lived at the strip for several months earlier this year to oversee the improvements.

A project to build a barracks and warehouse at the site was scrapped and the field was abandoned by July as a result of the Costa Rican pressure, crew members said.

Costa Rica's Public Security Minister Hernan Garron said at a September news conference that the property belonged to a Panama-based firm named Udal Research Corp., whose president was identified as Robert Olmsted. A cargo manifest dated Sept. 8 for a C123K cargo plane used in the resupply operations lists "Udaal Research Co." as the plane's operator.

Quintero moved back and forth between Costa Rica and El Salvador, where the air operation was based.

Part of his work was to obtain map coordinates from contra field commanders in southern Nicaragua and relay them to the flight crews making the drops, the new documents show. The papers were not among the ones recovered in October by the leftist Sandinista government from Hasenfus' downed plane.

Quintero and one other Cuban exile, who used the pseudonym "Ramon Medina," managed funds for the operation and were regularly paid through it, financial records from the operation reveal. Medina has been identified by the Nicaraguan government and through phone calls he made from El Salvador as Luis Posada, a fugitive wanted in Venezuela in connection with a 1976 Cubana airlines bombing which killed 73 persons.

Quintero, who often goes by the nickname "Chichi," was a CIA contract employee during the failed 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion and met Wilson through a mutual CIA associate.

Wilson is serving a 52-year federal prison sentence for illegally shipping arms to Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi in the mid-1970s.

At a 1983 trial, Quintero testified that Wilson offered him \$1 million to assassinate a Libyan critic of Gadhafi. Quintero, a vehement anticommunist, said he withdrew from the plot when he understood that the intended victim was opposed to the leftist Libyan regime.

Secord was investigated but never charged in connection with business deals that were tied to the investigation of Wilson. Secord testified on Wilson's behalf at one trial. The retired general also headed the U.S. Air Force mission in Iran from 1975 to 1978 and was later deputy assistant secretary of defense for the Middle East.